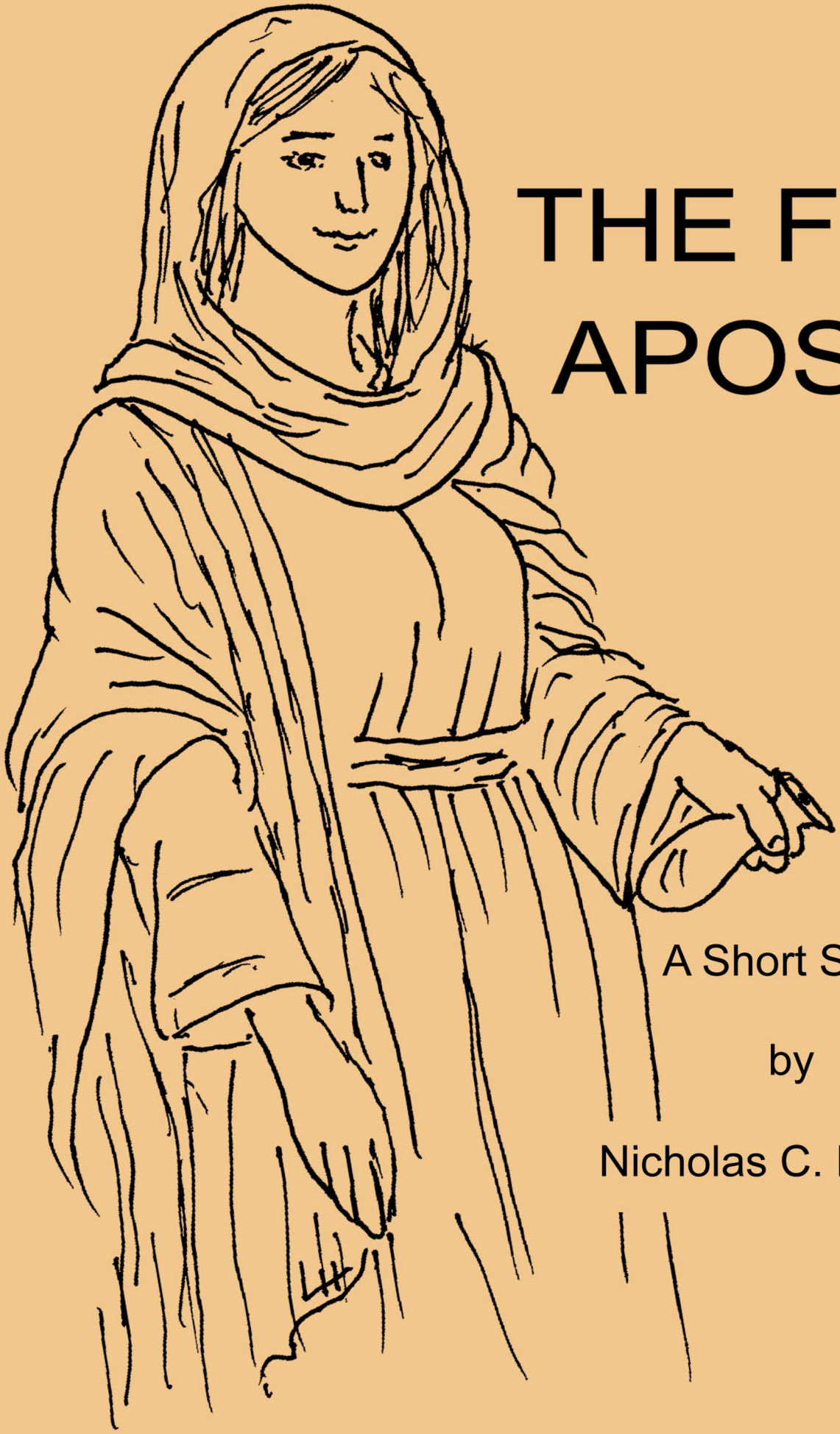

THE FIRST APOSTLE

A Short Story

by

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This story follows the life of Mary Magdalene
with a little "sanctified imagination" added to the mix.
It is also a protest against the oppression of the powerless.

Cover illustration Lionel Hartley

The First Apostle

Of the two sisters, Mary was the one who was noticed. It had always been that way. Ever since their childhood it was Mary who received the attention from grown-ups. She was the bright one, the pretty one, the one everybody made a fuss over. Martha was the one to whom people spoke politely before turning their full attention to her younger sister. Strange how insensitive grown-ups can be; do they think children don't notice?

By the time they were in their late teens the mould was set; Martha expected little from life except to fulfil her role as mother and homemaker. No, she would not achieve much, but her sense of duty would ensure she did what was expected by God and by society. Teenage Mary was still the centre of attention, only now it was not so much the adults, but the young men in her village of Bethany who noticed her. Heads turned as she danced vivaciously through the streets and market places. Older women looked on with disapproval, and, although they would never admit it, envy. Others looked as well.

One of those whose gaze fell on Mary of Bethany was Simon the Pharisee. Pharisees are not supposed to notice teenage girls. Like Job, they, *have made a covenant with my eyes, how then can I look upon a maid?*[1] But they are men nonetheless. Simon the Pharisee was one of the respected men of the village; he represented Bethany at the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem. In his mid-thirties and married by requirement of the Law in order to be a Pharisee, Simon was nonetheless still a man. In addition, Mary truly was beautiful.

Older men have an advantage over their younger counterparts. They know the right things to say to a woman. They know how to flatter. No nervous 17 year-old bumbling from Simon. This Pharisee knew exactly what to say. A timely counselling session from a religious leader was appropriate, was it not? A strategy was laid down, and for the first time in her short happy life, innocent Mary became a victim. Flattered by the kindly attention of this rich and important man, Mary did not realise the words said were designed to draw her into his net. She had no idea where Simon was leading her, but Simon the Pharisee knew exactly what he was doing. Believing she had found true love, young Mary allowed her innocence to be taken away.

The day the pious people of Bethany found out about it was the day Mary's life crashed around her. Even her true love turned on her. The whole arrangement was her doing, the Pharisee said. If she had not flaunted herself, he would not have noticed her. She was just a slut out to destroy a pillar of Bethany society for personal gain. Whilst the indignant townsfolk met to discuss the case and pass judgment, the frightened Pharisee fled to Jerusalem to make sure the story that reached the ears of his colleagues in the Sanhedrin was the one he wanted them to hear.

Meanwhile judgment against Mary was swift in coming. The terrified girl was dragged before the council of stern-faced elders and thrown down onto the sand before them. There she cowered in terror and confusion. The sentence was not long in coming. The Law was specific: *…The adulteress shall surely be put to death.*[2]

Mary would have been stoned on the spot but for the influence of one elderly man who had more wisdom and common sense than all the others combined. He also happened to have been a friend of Mary's parents before they had died. He knew this family, and he knew that whilst Mary was young and foolish, she was not the person that Simon the Pharisee was now claiming of her. He also knew the character of Simon. He stood up to speak.

When he spoke, he pointed out to the people how correct they were to condemn Mary to death, for there was no doubt that, according to the Law, she had committed a crime worthy of capital punishment. The Lord had spoken it. However, he reminded them, they had not quite quoted the scripture in its entirety. The Law said, *And the man that commits adultery with another man's wife, even he that commits adultery*

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1 Job 31:1.

2 Leviticus 20:10

with his neighbour's wife, the adulterer and the adulteress shall surely be put to death. Now, he reminded them, were they going to stone Simon too? Silence fell upon the court. Simon was rich, influential, and respected – by those who did not know him well. To stone a Pharisee would bring discredit upon all Pharisees. It would also bring Bethany into disrepute, a town where Pharisaism was tinted with corruption. No, that would never do. Discussion raged back and forth through the day and until late in the evening. When a judgment was finally made, it brought a horror and fear upon Mary that was, to her, almost worse than the stoning she had expected. Banishment. She was to leave Bethany and never return. Only in that way could the shame she had brought upon Simon the Pharisee be atoned for, they said. That night she was taken to the town's prison and left in the custody of the jailer, a brutal and powerful man who took full advantage of the night alone with his comely charge.

The following morning a soiled and terrified young woman was dragged by an angry crowd to the edge of town and thrown in a sobbing heap on the rocky ground. A priest intoned a curse upon her, then the crowd turned its back and headed home satisfied that justice had been done. Only Martha, Lazarus her brother, and the old man stayed with her. They could not take her home, but they were able to give her some food and money, and accompany her to Jerusalem, if she so wished, where they had friends who would look after her.

It is perhaps not hard to understand why Mary did not accept their offer. After the events of the last twenty-four hours, she certainly wanted to escape from her tormentors. But Jerusalem was only about two miles from Bethany. The story would have reached there already. How could she just go there and start again? How could she face anybody, even those she was told were friends? Especially them. No, she had to get right away, as far from Bethany, as far from Simon, as far from that hateful council, as far from that bestial jailer, as possible. She started to run from them. Amid sobs and blinded by tears, she ran; as far from Bethany and Jerusalem as possible, in a direction eastwards towards Qumran and the Dead Sea. There she could sink into obscurity and die.

Mary of Bethany ran until she could run no more. Then physically and emotionally exhausted, she dropped under the shade of a tree, and fell into a fitful and troubled sleep. When she awoke her mind was clearer. It was still only mid-day; the sun was blazing, and the area was dangerous. Bandits and various criminals used the region to hide up. She too needed to hide – and think. Where could she go? The logical place was Jericho. She could be swallowed up into insignificance there. But what would she do there? How would she support herself? Life had been easy until now. Even after her parents died her responsible elder brother and sister made sure life was secure. But now it was all different, she was no longer Mary of Bethany, she was Mary the Adulteress. She was soiled, unclean, all chance of a normal marriage and family gone. The man she loved had turned on her and caused her disgrace. Her life was over. Now she would have to survive by whatever means she knew. Jewish society was not kind to women. Women had no status, little chance for education; they were good only for producing heirs and obeying their men folk. But no self-respecting man would ever look twice at Mary the Adulteress. No, she was on her own now. If she were to survive, she would have to use her wits and her natural talent. She knew what that was. That was what had made her the victim in the first place. Yes, she had one thing on her side, and she would use it to her advantage. Never again would she be the victim. It was too late now to ever be a respectable member of Bethany society. She was condemned and guilty and she must pay the price. She must pay for this for the rest of her life even if she must inflict the punishment herself. She knew there was only one course open to her for survival. It would meet her material needs and would make sure she never forgot her shame and her filth.

Mary did not go immediately to Jericho. She continued eastwards descending into the Dead Sea Valley and there remained hidden among the cliffs and caves of that inhospitable region for two days. During that time she had to come to grips with her new station in life and pluck up the courage to implement the only plan she knew for her survival. She would have stayed hidden in the security of the Qumran caves for longer had thirst not driven her out in search of water.

Making her way northwards, Mary followed the valley down to where the Jordan River pours its life-giving water into the briny lake that ungratefully destroys any hope that may have been given it from above. All the time keeping hidden - not a difficult feat since, besides the brigands, it was only shepherds and their flocks that inhabited this wasteland - she finally arrived at a part of the river sufficiently secluded, and yet clear enough to quench her thirst and wash away the filth she had been carrying with her since her humiliation.

Her mind was still in chaos and her spirit was burdened with a sense of guilt and shame as she worked her way northwards following the course of the river. But as she neared Bethabara the number of people increased and it became unnatural to try to conceal herself. Her instinct was to run back to the obscurity of the desert, but her food was gone, and here, she realised, nobody knew her. They could not read the pain and the shame, and they passed by without so much as a look. Must be just a shepherd girl, they thought.

Just south of Bethabara, Mary's attention was drawn to a gathering on the riverbank. At first she could not see what was the object of their attention, but as she drew closer and mingled with the crowd, she heard a man addressing the onlookers. She was unable to hear the words, and she decided he was probably a Zealot using a remote place such as this to preach his anti-Roman rhetoric. *He* wouldn't last long, she decided. The troops would be down here in no time.

Did she detect a hint of bitterness in her thoughts? This was a new emotion. But why not? With her life destroyed at one stroke by a smooth-talking religious leader, she would soon learn to be cynical. Yes, she had to survive now. She would never trust a man again, and certainly not a religious one. Mary made a move to pass by, but as she did so she obtained a glimpse of the speaker. He was different than she had expected. Dressed in a camelskin garment, he reminded her of her mental image of Elijah the prophet. He was actually standing in the water. She could hear him now. His words too were not inflammatory, but he spoke of spiritual things. She did not fully understand what he was saying, but as he talked of repentance and God's grace, she saw people go out to him in the water where he immersed them briefly beneath the surface.

As Mary listened to the camelskin man talk, she found herself strangely attracted to his words. And when he talked of One to come who would bring about a new kingdom, one into which repentant sinners were welcome, she, for a brief moment, saw a glimmer of hope at the end of the dark tunnel into which her life had plunged. But only for a brief moment. Another religious man? Forget it. They're all the same. Reality came flooding back. She had no home, no friends, she was despised, disgraced, and filthy, and she must survive. With a surge of anger and frustration, Mary turned from the scene and continued northwards to the road that would lead her the five miles westwards from the river to Jericho. She knew what she had to do.

As she turned westward, the late afternoon sun blinded Mary, but soon she was close enough to Jericho's city gates that the sun was hidden from view and she could clearly see the entrance to the city that was to be her unwelcome home for the foreseeable future. Feeling overwhelmed with a sense of anger mingled with dejection and fear, she joined a throng of people coming and going, and was mercifully swallowed up in the crowd. It was not difficult for her to find her way to the market place, for that was where most of the people were coming from. Once there, she spent some of the money Lazarus had given her on some food to give her strength for what was to come. Then she made her way to that part of the market where they sold the various cheap face-paints and perfume that would, from now on, become an undesirable part of her life.

As the crowds left the market to go home, Mary found a secluded place in a corner of the market to sit down and apply the make up. Roughly, nervously, and angrily, she went to work without any reflective surface to examine the results. Finally she was as satisfied as she ever would be. Straightening her dusty and unkempt tunic as best she could she made her way through the streets following sights and sounds until she knew she was in the right neighbourhood. Then stopping at a strategic corner, she waited surreptitiously for the right opportunity.

When it came in the form of a slightly inebriated Roman soldier wandering alone down the street, she furtively approached him and said, "Hey Soldier Boy, you looking for a good time?"

2

It will be merciful to Mary to close the curtain on her life at this point. For it descended into a perdition that it is neither pleasant nor necessary to describe. Abuse and violence were her lot. And along with them an ever present sense of condemnation which drove her from one town to the next, ever seeking to escape the judgment of God and society; never able to feel safe in one place, and never at home anywhere. The result of this unnatural life led Mary into the depths of degradation and shame that finally drove her into demon possession and near insanity. All that remained was hope; hope that one day something or someone would come to save her from this living hell. But there were times when even that hope was gone.

Whilst Mary had thought to take control of her destiny, she had, in realty, again become its victim. Like countless thousands before her, and millions since, Mary was forced into a heartless struggle for survival that destroyed all remaining traces of decency and self-respect.

Mary is typical of the women of many countries of the world. She has no decision-making power; she is socially inferior; She has no control over her life or destiny. She has little opportunity for education. She is often the victim of barbaric cultural practices designed either to ensure her loyalty to her husband, or to make her sexually appealing. In greatest need of healthcare, she is last to receive it. She works longest in the fields, but is the last to eat. In desperation she does the only thing she can think of, and that is to sell her own body. The society that forced her into that measure then arrogantly assumes she does it because she enjoys it, and, instead of making laws to protect her, makes laws to condemn her. There are more Marys than ever today. From Bogota to Bangkok, from Mexico City to Manila. Naïve and innocent young girls are unwittingly sold by uneducated parents into an industry demanded by the very same perverse society that condemns it. Living in fear of abuse by their pimps and in fear of debilitating disease, these young women have only one thing left, the hope that one day they may be rescued from it all.

3

We will pick up the thread of Mary's life again some two years later[3] in the Galilean township of Magdala. Situated at the mid-point of the western shore of the Sea of Galilee, this town housed a Roman regiment. Whilst it ostensibly maintained security in the Galilean region, it did serve nonetheless, due to its lakeside location, as a place of rest and recreation for the troops. Consequently, for a woman like Mary, there was money to be made. Of course there were other women there for the same reason, and as a result, there was the ever present curse known as the pimp who controlled the women and took most their earnings in return for what he termed "protection".

Nevertheless, Mary's life developed a degree of stability here, and whilst it was no more pleasant, by now she had developed a degree of toughness – or was it numbness? – that enabled her to survive. She even found a way to outwit her pimp; she hid portions of her earnings as long as she dared, fully knowing her fate if he found out, and with these savings she purchased, from an Arab trader, a beautiful Egyptian alabaster jar. Then as she could, she purchased minute amounts of expensive perfume which she would add to the container. It was somehow easier to hide this than coins and it became a sort of symbol of hope in her bankrupt life. It represented defiance against her oppression and it provided some financial security against the time when she was no longer able to earn a living this way.

But perhaps most important of all was that the perfume gave Mary a sense of independence; a hint of freedom. It was a touch of the beautiful in a world where beauty did not exist; an island of green in an ocean of mud; a peak of hope in the valley of despair. What was more offensive than the brothel? What was more exquisite than the perfume?

On the rare occasion there was opportunity to take the precious little jar out of hiding, she would remove the lid and allow the fragrance to transport her to another world, a world fitted to contain such a perfume, a world that might have been - had it not been for that Pharisee.

She understood that man now; she had seen a thousand more like him. They came in all their piety and some even thought they should not have to pay because that would make it a sin. Hypocrites!

Worst of all was the guilt. Her parents had raised her to fear God. She was not concerned about how she stood in the eyes of the religious leaders for they were no better than she was. But in *God's* sight... Did *God* reject her? Did *God* condemn her? If only she could escape this nightmare existence and start life again, but Pimp had almost total control. He took 90% of her earnings claiming it was a pittance for the lodging he provided. And, he said, did he not pay for her treatment when she had the disease? Did he not arrange for her to have "The Procedure"[4] when she was pregnant? Did he not take great care of all his girls? In reality, if she ever tried to escape from all this by running away, he would find her and beat her, just like he did to every girl who tried to escape. Only when she was too old or too sick would Pimp not look for her. Then he was glad to see the end of her. Mary would need the exquisite little jar and its precious contents then.

More and more Mary found herself thinking of the words of the camelskin man down at the Jordan River, and his talk of the One to come who would cleanse her. But would He want to? Wasn't it was too late

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[3] This assumes John the Baptist was preaching at least two years prior to the anointing of the Messiah. The Scriptures are silent on this point.

[4] Abortions are known to have been performed since the days of the Egyptian dynasties.

for her? Not only was she a whore, but her custom came from the uncircumcised Romans - and the Pharisees. Hypocrites!

Thus as painful month followed painful month, the quality of Mary's life deteriorated to the point where she no longer had any self-control or self-respect. There was no escape from the misery of her existence, and no hope that she would ever be free of this tormented life. As the despair increased, she would find her behaviour becoming increasingly erratic. She would scream at people, cursing them for some real or imagined wrong. Children would torment her and then laugh as she yelled abuse at them, dodging as she tried to hurl stones wildly at them in her fury. Mary gained a reputation as a mad woman and became a laughing-stock in her street. But she never forgot the prophecy of the camelskin man.

One day there was word in Galilee that a new Teacher was in the area. Some said He was the Messiah. They said He had performed a miracle at Cana[5] thirty miles to the West. A glimmer of hope penetrated Mary's troubled mind. Would He come here to Magdala? If He did, would He condemn her too? Was He just another hypocrite? He came from Nazareth, they said. But everyone knew that nothing good came out of Nazareth,[6] so there was no point in getting one's hopes up.

A few weeks after that another story began circulating in Magdala. Again, hope sprang up in the heart of Mary. Word reached the town that a strange thing had happened in Capernaum, less than fifteen miles to the North. The story went like this: the Teacher – Jesus they called him - was in Cana, and had healed a boy who was in Capernaum.[7] Now how could that happen? Must be a trick. Capernaum was fifty miles from Cana.

After this, there was an increase in the number of people in Magdala. Travelers passed through asking if they knew where the Teacher was. Stories began circulating and people began talking about this new Teacher. There developed in Magdala an air of excitement, as though something big was about to happen.

Then one day it happened. The Teacher came to Magdala. It was mid-morning when it became evident that something was astir. People coming in from the West were saying He was coming. Sure enough some time later a large crowd could be seen making its way slowly towards Magdala.[8] Mary quickly went out to meet it. A mile out of town she came across one of the largest crowds she had ever seen. At its head, but barely visible was a Man of around thirty years of age. He was obviously the centre of attention. The crowds hampered him, but slowly He made His way towards the town. Mary joined the crowd. She could get nowhere near the Man. When they reached the town, the Man made His way toward the synagogue. Once there He took up a position in the entrance and turned His attention to the crowds. She saw His face. He was youngish, surprisingly ordinary looking, but with a look of authority and purposefulness that surpassed his years. He began to speak to them saying *Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand*.[9] Mary stopped short. These were the same words used by the camelskin man. Then perhaps this *was* the One he had talked of.

For the rest of the day Mary heard and saw the most amazing things. She heard words about forgiveness and eternal life. She heard God described as a loving Father who longs to welcome even the humblest person into His Kingdom. She spent the day with a profound sense of wonder mixed with a burden of her own life. If only she could have this healing for herself. But of course that was impossible. She was much too sinful, everyone knew that.

As Mary listened, she became increasingly convicted of the purity and godliness of this Man. As she did so, she became increasingly conscious of her own sinful condition. The need for forgiveness seemed to be more important than anything else. But how could she be forgiven? Even if she did repent, what would she do? The only life she knew involved Pimp. The only friends she had were the other girls. What was the use?

Gradually Mary was aware of something occurring within her. A conflict was developing. A part of her recoiled from this goodness, yet at the same time, she knew that He was her only hope of salvation. A hatred for the Teacher's purity rose up within her whilst at the same time her terror of His condemnation

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5 John 2:1-11

6 John 1:46

7 John 4:43-54

8 Matthew 4:23-25

9 Matthew 4:17

became so great that she felt she could not contain it any longer. Suddenly she had to get away, but some inner desire held her to her only means of help. Then it all spilled out. A tormented shriek burst from her lips and she threw herself to the ground screaming. Screams mingled with curses mixed with cries for help. The people moved away staring at her in horror as she thrashed around on the ground in front of them. She lost consciousness.

When Mary came back to her senses, her first awareness was the face of the Teacher. He was kneeling on the ground beside her, holding her hand. A wonderful feeling of peace such as she had not experienced before flowed through her. He spoke to her. The crowd looked on in wonder, but it seemed to Mary that there were just the two of them there that day. Just she and the Teacher. And she knew she was forgiven.

As the day drew to a close and people began drifting away, Mary could not bring herself to return to her street. Instead she followed Jesus and four other men[10] to a house in another part of Magdala. Others followed too and some entered the house, but these were Magdala people and they knew who Mary was. She had to stay outside. But Galilean homes were relatively open dwellings and Mary could get close enough to hear more precious words from the Teacher. When the household retired for the night Mary slept in the street outside.

The following morning at daybreak, the five men left the house and headed north along the coast in the direction of Capernaum. Mary followed. As they traveled people joined them so that by the time they approached the town, large crowds were following. Jesus surveyed the crowd and then looked about Him at the surrounding hills. Selecting a rise in the ground surrounded by a large open space, He made for the rise and sat down at the top of it. He bade the people sit down. Below them the white buildings of Capernaum glistened in the morning sun. Jesus opened his mouth to speak.

Blessed are the poor in spirit,
For theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are those who mourn,
For they will be comforted.
Blessed are the meek,
For they will inherit the earth.
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
For they will be filled…[11]

It seemed to Mary he was speaking especially to her.

Mary spent the entire day listening to the words of Jesus. Later a leper came and was healed instantly. Then in Capernaum a Roman soldier of all people came to him asking for healing for his servant. It was all too amazing. After this, there was no way Mary could return to the life of the brothel. But where could she go? And what could she do? For today she would follow Jesus. Then she would decide what to do next.

That evening, after dark, Pimp found Mary. He had spent the entire day looking for her. The story of how Jesus had cast the demon out of her had reached him and so he guessed he might find her wherever the Teacher was. Repercussions were swift and strong.

4

One is tempted at this juncture to again close the curtain on Mary's life. But this time it would be for the sake of the reader alone. Whilst we can be spared the details of Pimp's treatment of Mary that day and subsequently, it is necessary to understand her torment during the days and months to follow. For no slave owner gives up his assets easily. Many who choose to follow Christ confront an enemy who will stop at nothing to keep his prisoner in chains. Mary was forgiven and committed to a new start in life. But at the same time she was a slave to a lifestyle that was now all she knew, and it takes more than the human to fully appreciate how the spirit is willing and the flesh is weak.

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10 John 4:18-22

11 Matt 5:1-6

It also requires an appreciation of the woman's position in Mary's society. The decision as to what to do with her life simply was not hers. She was no more than the pimp's possession with no power to make decisions affecting her own life and destiny. This sounds hard to believe to the modern mind, but in many parts of the world today the situation is no different. Indeed it is only in those lands liberated by the Gospel of Jesus Christ that the woman has found the degree of control over her own life, and the freedom to make decisions concerning her own destiny, that her Creator intended her to have.

That day in Magdala marked the turning point in Mary's life. That day she learned that there really is hope for better things. She learned she was forgiven and accepted by God - she did not have to become good in order to be accepted; God accepted her just as she was. Until that day she had not known anything but her misery. Now she knew there was a God who loved her, and above all, who fully understood her pitiful situation. For a full day she had sat at the feet of One who sought only her good; One who loved and accepted her. No longer a vague and distant promise; the One the camelskin man had talked of was now reality.

Thus Mary entered a new phase of life. It lasted three years. During that time she struggled with herself, and struggled with the chains of vice that shackled her to a lifestyle from which she just could not break free. During those three years Mary lived two lives; one in the brothel with all that belonged to it, the other dominated by thoughts of the Teacher. Every time Jesus came to her part of Galilee she would steal away to listen to him. Another five times, the madness within her was expelled. Each time, she felt the joy and peace of forgiveness, but was unable to break the chains by making the full commitment to God that was required for total victory. She had not learned that total trust in God asks no questions about the future. It leaves the future up to God.

During this time, however, one event took place that was later to have a profound effect, not only on Mary's life, but on the lives of several others. It would, in fact, lead to the most powerful demonstration of the Teacher's love for humankind of his entire ministry. It happened after the second time the Teacher had come to Mary's rescue in her madness. During His ministry, the Teacher never failed to demonstrate his interest, not only in the spiritual welfare of men and women, but also in them simply as people. Thus, when Mary came back to her senses Jesus raised her to her feet and took her off to one side to where they could speak quietly together. Still in view of the people, but out of immediate earshot, they sat down under a tree and Jesus asked her about herself; her name and her village. As Mary began to talk of Bethany, she found herself pouring out the whole story of her disgrace with the Pharisee, the banishment and her subsequent slide into her current degradation. The sorrow on the Teacher's face was evident as He listened to the sad tale of an innocent becoming the victim of man's greed and uncontrolled selfishness. How He longed for the day when sin would be no more. He asked her of her family and learned she had no parents but only a brother and sister in Bethany. On learning their names He promised He would visit them next time He was in Judea.

4

We will pick up the thread of Mary's life again toward the end of this three-year period when an incident occurred that was to have a profound and lasting effect on her life. It came about when Pimp needed to go to Jerusalem on business. He also wanted one of the girls to undergo "the Procedure", and Jerusalem was the best place to do it. It was his custom to take at least one other girl with him to cover the expenses of his trip. This time it was Mary who was to cover the expenses. The journey to Jerusalem was an ordeal that covered about eighty miles and took three days of either walking in the heat or jostling on the back of a cart drawn by a donkey. Not so bad for Pimp as he would ride his own donkey.

On arrival at Jerusalem, Pimp checked them all into the usual inn in the district where few questions were ever asked, and set out to make the necessary arrangements for the abortion. Mary knew what was expected of her and as soon as it was evening she went out into the streets to do her duty. It would be another night of abuse and mistreatment, but there was no escape.

It was late that evening at the inn whilst Mary was between clients that a Pharisee came to the inn. She saw him talk to Pimp quietly and somewhat furtively for a few minutes and then disappear after slipping Pimp a coin.

Early the next morning, shortly before dawn, and just as Mary was trying to get some desperately needed sleep, Pimp rudely barged into her sleeping quarter and led a man in with him. The man went over to Mary, but she, exhausted, tried to push him away.

Suddenly, there was a commotion outside, and a group of men burst into the room, grabbed Mary roughly and dragged her off her sleeping mat and out of the building. In spite of the cold, for it was winter,[12] they tore off her clothing to the waist in accordance with custom when a woman was caught in the act of adultery. Through the streets of Jerusalem they dragged her. Her screams, curses and tears served only to draw more people to the scene. Cries of "adultery" and "caught in the very act" reached her ears. Then she knew there would be no mercy for her. *…The adulteress shall surely be put to death.* In her mind, she was back in Bethany experiencing the whole nightmare again. The hostile elders, that jailer. For the thousandth time it all came back. Only this time there would be no-one to stand in her defence. So this was the last day of her wretched life. Well, let it end. Let the stones come. What did she care? The misery was over. Her release from hell was here at last. *…The adulteress shall surely be put to death.*

Mary fell silent as the angry crowd made its way through the streets. She was pushed, shoved, dragged, cursed and beaten with sticks, until they reached that most sacred building in all Israel, the Holy Temple.

The Outer Court of the Temple, accessible to all and sundry, is known as *The Court of the Gentiles*. It was here that Mary was brought. Just at the entrance to the Court, the crowd threw her down onto the sand, where she remained, in all her shame and disgrace. She cowered on the ground waiting for the first stone to strike her. She didn't even notice that she had been thrown at the feet of a Man who was looking at her, not with hostility, nor with indifference, but with the tender pity and empathy of One who knows personally the pain she was suffering.[13]

She waited for the first stone to strike. But instead of a stone, she heard somebody speak. A question was asked, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?"[14]

Mary awaited her condemnation. Silence. She became aware of a Presence close to her. She looked up. There, kneeling before her was Jesus. He was looking at her. Not in anger as were her accusers. Not in lust like most men she knew. His face was gentle and at peace. Yet it possessed a strength she had never noticed before. The two looked at each other, and everything else was forgotten. The crowds. The hatred. Pimp. There was just the two of them at that moment. She, cowering with sand in her bedraggled hair and on her tear stained cheek, He, down on one knee looking tenderly at her as though reaching out to her. Mary looked at this face and experienced an emotion too complex to describe; His eyes were wet. Then she read something else in His face, something that did not belong there. For an instant she saw that He was angry. But instinctively she knew the anger was not directed at her. He removed His outer garment and placed it around her shaking shoulders to cover her nakedness and to give her warmth.

Jesus looked up at the crowd, surveying them. Not a word was said. His gaze seemed to penetrate their hearts, each one as though they also were also the only ones there. It was as though *they* were the ones on trial, not the girl. They shifted uncomfortably. Expectantly. Waiting to see how He would answer the question.

Finally, after what seemed an eternity, Jesus turned His attention to the ground and began to write in the sand. People craned their necks to see what He was writing. They couldn't understand it.

The Pharisees, who had arranged the entire incident began to feel they were losing control of the situation. They urged again, "What do you say?" They must have an answer. Their hatred of Jesus was unsurpassed. It didn't matter what He said, for whatever He said would condemn Him. If He said stone the girl, they would report Him to the Romans as undermining Roman authority. If He showed mercy on her, they would be able to demonstrate His disdain for the Law of Moses. This was their moment. They mustn't lose it. "What do you say?"

Jesus rose to His feet and looked the Pharisee in the eye. *"If any of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her".*

He knelt down again, as though in this entire crowd, the only one he wanted to be with was Mary. He resumed writing in the sand. The crowd leaned forward craning their necks to see the writing. Then slowly they began to understand. Jesus was writing the sins of the accusers. One by one, starting with the eldest of them He was letting each one see their own lives as God sees them.

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12 John 10:22

13 Isaiah 53:3-5

14 John 8:1-11 NIV. The Scriptures do not identify the woman.

No man can stand before the judgment of God without a Mediator. But when the Mediator Himself draws up the charges, to whom will the guilty turn? Slowly, one by one, the accusers, starting with the questioner, turned around and slunk nervously away from the Temple, the dwelling place of God.

When only a few remained, Jesus looked up at a youngish man in the robes of a Pharisee standing behind Mary where she couldn't see him. The kneeling Man's gaze penetrated the other's like a sharp sword. The writing began, *He who causes one of my children to sin, it would be better for him that he be thrown into the sea with a millstone around his neck.*[15] Simon of Bethany turned and fled. As he did so he saw to his horror that on his right hand had developed some small, hard lesions. When he touched them, they lacked sensation. He knew instantly what they were. He was a leper.

Finally it was all over. Only the two remained. Mary, her head buried in her hands had not been fully aware of what had taken place. She heard the gentle voice, *Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?* She looked up at Jesus and saw the trace of a smile on his face. She looked about her. They were alone but for a small group of men whom she knew to be his followers.

"No one, Lord", she said.

Then neither do I condemn you. Jesus declared. *Go now and leave your life of sin.*

The sun appeared above the city wall and shed its warm caress over the bruised frame of the young woman.

5

Jesus had said, *Go now*. But Mary didn't want to go anywhere. When He said, *Neither do I condemn you*, she realised again how much it meant to her to hear those words, especially from Him. She had been despised and condemned ever since that dreadful day in Bethany, and she had lived in terror of being condemned by God as well. Now here was the One she knew was the Messiah telling her, *Neither do I condemn you*. She fully realised now, it was only when in His presence she felt the love and acceptance of God. Like a wanderer lost in the desert, all she wanted was to stay near this Man and drink in God's grace.

People began to drift back towards the Temple. Common people and children, the poor and the sick, all came. Some Pharisees warily approached, but without the look of expectancy on their faces that characterised the others. Mary watched, still crouching on the sandy ground, still weak with emotion and oblivious of her appearance.

Jesus sat down on the bottom step to the Court of the Gentiles right next to Mary and began to speak to the people, *I am the light of the world,* he said*, Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.*[16] Mary sat up, giving her full attention to these words, their import striking her more fully than ever before. She tucked her legs under her and sat entranced. As He spoke, she hung on every word He said. Nothing could induce her to leave. As long as He was speaking she would stay.

Mary saw the most wonderful things that day; she saw the sick healed, she saw sight restored to the blind, she saw children brought to him by proud mothers for a blessing and a word of encouragement. Above all she heard the words of eternal life. She had seen and heard these things many times over the past three years, but this time their full import came home to her. This time there was no going back. Now she knew she would leave her life of vice regardless of the consequences. For now she would put her full trust in God to take care of her. Now she fully understood that forgiveness was freely available to even the hardest of sinners. Even for Mary the Adulteress. She realised that day that God forgave her for her adultery in Bethany, and for her subsequent life of sin. She realised what it really meant that God had sent his Son, not to condemn the world, but to save the world through his Son, and that whoever believes in the Son will never be condemned.[17] Yes, she believed, and He knew she believed. For He had said, *Neither do I condemn you.*

All day she listened to Jesus. All day she observed the Son of God in action. She drank in everything He said, and watched in wonder as she saw His love flowing out to the most humble and unattractive people. She saw the arrogant Pharisees try to dispute with Him, but without any answers for

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15 Matthew 18:5

16 John 8:12

17 John 3:17,18

His wisdom. When Jesus moved about the Temple, she followed. He was careful never to go where women and children could not go too. When He left the Temple she still followed. She gave no thought to food or to her physical tiredness; she wanted to be only in the presence of this wonderful Man. She learned marvelous things that day, and she knew that from this time on she would never be the same again. Some things He said disturbed her. What did He mean when He said, *I am going away, and you will look for me…*? And, *When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am…*?[18] This was a mystery beyond her comprehension.

It was shortly after darkness fell that Mary made her wrong move. As the day ended the crowds had begun to disburse, and Jesus and His disciples had headed towards somebody's home. She should have followed, but she became aware of her hunger and moved away to find something to eat.

But in her newfound sense of freedom she had forgotten Pimp.

Pimp had not taken the events of the day well. He was mad, really mad. Firstly, he had been tricked by the Pharisee who had come to the inn the night before. Nothing had been said about stoning the girl. They just wanted to borrow her for a while, he had said. Pimp, naturally had followed the crowd to the Temple. But when he saw the Man writing in the sand, and saw everyone leaving, he knew this was no place for him. He was off. During the day he tried many times to grab Mary, but she was always too close to the Man. As long as she stayed close by him, Pimp was powerless to get her back. Nevertheless, he hung around, out of Mary's sight, but never far away.

It was shortly after dark that his opportunity came. He knew that to try to force her back would lead to a struggle and more screams – and he knew, if anyone could scream and curse it was Mary. So, taking the small wooden club he carried at all times in his donkey cart, he silently approached Mary from behind and brought the club down - not too hard mind you - on her head. She fell to the ground without making a sound.

When she awoke, Mary at first had no idea where she was or what had happened. As awareness returned she found herself lying on the donkey cart and tied to it with a gag over her mouth. Pimp was taking no chances. It was quite dark, but Mary was able to see that she was outside the inn. For several hours she remained tied to the cart, unable to move or breathe properly, and with a serious headache. For several hours she lay there until finally the crow of the roosters and the colours of dawn heralded the beginning of a new day. As soon as it was light Pimp came out looking very pleased with himself. He led out the other girl, who was obviously also in extreme discomfort, and in abject misery. Without saying a word the other girl threw herself angrily onto the cart and curled up beside Mary facing away from her.

Pimp happily climbed onto his donkey and they headed off towards Galilee, he leading on a rope the other donkeys harnessed to the cart. Not a word was said.

Instead of despair as one might have expected, Mary felt only peace as she lay on the cart. Now she was ready to leave Magdala, and would gladly face death than return to her old life. Her thoughts returned to the things Jesus had said yesterday:

I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.[19] *If you know the truth, the truth will set you free. If the Son sets you free, you are free indeed.*

Yes, she was free now. As she lay tied to the cart she knew she was totally free. She was free in Christ. She realized now why her ointment had been so precious to her. It symbolised the Teacher. He was the touch of the beautiful in the ugly world; He was Purity itself amid the ocean of filth; He was the Pearl of great price and Hope for the hopeless. What was more offensive than sin? What was more exquisite than the perfume of forgiveness? Besides she was wearing His robe, and in it she felt pure and innocent.

As the donkey cart slowly rumbled down the road, Mary calmly made her plans for her return to Bethany. She reached out her hand, now freed by Pimp, and gently took the hand of the suffering girl beside her.

It was dusk when they arrived at the infamous street in Magdala. Without saying a word Mary climbed down from the cart and went to her sleeping quarters. She took a few clothes and some money she had hidden and then carefully retrieved the alabaster jar from its hiding place. Then she placed some of the clothes in the bottom of her basket, and ever so carefully placed the jar in the clothes and then packed other clothes around it. Then she placed a cloth over the basket and walked out of the house with it.

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[18] John 8:21, 28

[19] These quotes come from Christ's dispute with the Jewish leaders recorded in John 8.

It was still early enough that a woman going through the streets carrying a basket on her head attracted no attention. Mary headed for the market, now almost closed for the day. There she purchased some food and items for a journey. Then she found a quiet corner of the market to transform her appearance from that of a town girl to that of a peasant. This would make her less conspicuous as she traveled. It would not be possible to travel at night, and she also knew Pimp would have expected her to work that night, and would have beaten her savagely had she refused. Therefore it was safer to leave the house now and hide up for the night. Fortunately she knew a part of the market behind a large pile of fish baskets where nobody came after dark. She also knew Pimp would not bother to go looking for her after dark. He would just wait for her to return and then give her a beating.

Behind the fish baskets Mary did what she should have done a lot more of over the last three years; she prayed. All that evening she poured out her soul, confessing her old life, and committing her new life to the One who hears all prayers from the humble and penitent.

At the first hint of dawn, Mary emerged from her hideout. Then, placing her basket on her head and supporting it with one hand, she looked, and smelt, like any fisher girl as she made her way through the streets onto the south road that would lead her to Nazareth, the first town on her way back to Bethany. Mary's new life had begun.

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To complete the story it is necessary at this point to leave Mary to her journey whilst we follow the affairs of the one who had led her into the horror of the last five years, Simon the Pharisee, now known as Simon the Leper.

Simon had felt no conscience about the fall of Mary of Bethany. His cloak of religion covered many a sin from his own eyes and from the eyes of his community. But God knows the heart of every man, and it was not possible for the Pharisee to hide his true character from the sinless One that morning at the Temple.

Thus the events of that morning were a profound shock to Simon, and the sudden appearance of the lesions condemned him to a fate worse than death. He would now have to present himself to the priest and then go into exile from society. Condemned to the society of nobody except fellow leprosy sufferers, the punishment, for punishment he knew it to be by the advanced state it had already reached, was more than he could endure.

Many times a merciful God allows suffering to bring about a good end. And this is how it was in Simon's case. A sufferer from leprosy sees the world through different eyes than does a Pharisee. In his desperation Simon, as he contemplated his bleak future in the days to follow, was led to analyse his past. What sins had he committed to be stricken with this terrible curse? His mind went to the scene at the Temple. *He who causes one of my children who loves me to sin; it would be better for him that he be thrown into the sea with a millstone around his neck.* These were the words of Jesus that terrible morning. Did the Teacher know the whole sordid affair of Mary and himself? But how? Only God can know the deepest secrets of men. This Man claimed to be the Messiah, yet he condemned the Pharisees and forgave whores. So how could he be the Son of God as he claimed? This was a mystery too great for Simon's bigoted mind to grasp. Yet now he was a leper. Lepers were despised as the worst of sinners in Israel, but this Teacher had cleansed lepers too. Then how could the Teacher be of God? In spite of these thoughts, Simon knew his only chance of healing came from this Teacher. Could he now go to the One he had despised and ask Him for healing? That was asking too much. Yet wasn't it better than being a leper? Simon, in desperation, decided to find Jesus.

The day after the incident at the Temple, Jesus had left Jerusalem and gone down to the region of Bethabara where John the Baptist had first preached, and where Mary had first heard the promise of the One to come.[20] It was there that Simon found Jesus. He approached, but not too close. This was the most difficult thing he had ever done. But he must be rid of this disease, and Jesus was his only hope. Coming as close as he dared, but not wanting to be recognised by the Teacher or any one else present, Simon stood, still some thirty feet away, covered his face with the hood of his garment, and cried out, "Jesus, Master. Have mercy on me".[21]

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20 John 10:40-42.

21 Dialogue taken from Luke 17:12-14.

Jesus turned and looked at Simon. Even from that distance Simon knew his heart was read like an open book. As they looked at each other for the second time in as many weeks, Simon again recognised he was in the presence of One far greater and far purer than himself.

One wonders why Jesus would consider for one second honouring Simon's request. Or was it a demand? But that's the thing about leprosy. It carries with it the stigma that sets it apart as different from all other conditions. It acts exactly the way sin acts; it destroys nerve endings making us insensitive to pain just as sin makes us insensitive to the pain we cause others when we sin against them. Besides that, in the mind of the sufferer, leprosy was caused by sin, therefore to heal the disease was to forgive the sin.[22] When anyone with leprosy requested Jesus for healing, the response was instantaneous. Thus, when Simon requested healing, Jesus' response was immediate.

Go and show yourself to the priests.

Simon stood still. They looked at each other. Was that all there was? He had already showed himself to the priests and they had condemned him as a sinner and defrocked him as a Pharisee. But as Simon looked at Jesus, something passed between them. Simon experienced something new; something in his pharisaical heart was touched, and for the first time Simon experienced that mystery that is known as Faith. A look of uncertainty crossed his face. He half turned to go, but then looked back at the Teacher, as if unsure of himself. Jesus said nothing, but His slight nod was a gesture of encouragement, as if to say, "Trust me Simon".

Simon turned to go back to Jerusalem. He started to walk away, and as he did so, he felt the slightest sensation in his body. Nothing obvious at first, but gradually, as he stepped out in faith, he saw the most extraordinary thing. The lesions were fading.

Who was this Jesus? How could a Man so humble have so much power? How could One with so much power be so good? Surely God punished sinners, not healed them. So how could this Man be of God? Yet only a Man from God could do the things Jesus did. Simon was confused. His hatred for Jesus was evaporating, yet the Teacher's nature was to him incomprehensible.

By the time Simon reached Jerusalem all trace of the leprosy had disappeared. His presentation to the priests was a formality. Simon was clean.

Mary had long since completed her journey by this time. However, those last few miles had not been made without some trepidation. She knew it was a new Mary who was returning to Bethany. But how would she be received? These good folk would never forget her sin, even if, in God's sight, her past life was unremembered.[23] Finally she decided it would be discretionary, although somewhat distasteful, to enter the town under cover of darkness.

The reunion with Martha and Lazarus brought many surprises. She had to admit relief to learn Simon had left Bethany. She felt no happiness at the news of his leprosy, for no one truly born again ever feels joy at someone else's suffering. But her greatest surprise was to learn of the close relationship that had developed between Jesus and her siblings.

Of course Jesus had kept his promise. She knew that, because in subsequent healings He had brought Mary news of her family. But she had not known of the depth of devotion these two had developed for the Teacher. They had gladly and readily accepted Jesus as the Messiah, and their intelligent maturity had provided for the itinerant Teacher a haven of rest over the three years of his ministry. However, Mary soon learned that she was not welcome back in Bethany, but due to her family's acquaintance with Jesus, whom many had come to believe in, she was tolerated. But she kept a low profile.

After Mary had been back in Bethany a little over a week, two developments took place; neither of them welcome to her. The first was the return of Simon. He claimed to have been healed by Jesus, and declared clean by the priests in Jerusalem. He soon returned to his prominent position in the town. But whilst cautious of Mary's presence, he made no move against her.

The second event was disastrous. Lazarus developed a fever which quickly went to his brain. Death became imminent. Word was sent to Jesus who was still teaching down by the Jordan River. Had Jesus come immediately he would have arrived about ten hours after the messenger left. But two days later Jesus was still down by the river, and it was not for another two days that He and his followers finally, and somewhat casually arrived at the outskirts of Bethany. By that time Lazarus had been dead four days.

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22 Matthew 9:2-5.

23 Isaiah 43:25; Jeremiah 31: 34.

Mary and Martha were devastated. This was so uncharacteristic of the Master. Never had He seemed so apparently indifferent. "If only He had been here", they kept repeating, "Lazarus would not have died".

When word came that Jesus was outside Bethany, it came only to Martha. Lazarus had been an influential man, and many of the mourners were highly placed in Jerusalem. Many were there who strongly opposed Jesus, and who also disapproved of Lazarus and his sisters' relationship with Him. Their presence in the house, together with the wailing of the hired mourners, did not suit the purpose of Jesus in returning to Bethany. For that reason He waited at the edge of the village after sending a discreet messenger with the news of His arrival.

On hearing the news, Martha, understanding the situation, quietly slipped out. Mary, the emotional sister, was too upset to take notice, and was unaware of the Master's arrival until after Martha returned, took her aside out of earshot of the guests, and said to her, "The Teacher is here, and is asking for you". Forgetting the need for discretion, Mary immediately arose and, with an expression of eager anticipation on her face, ran out of the house.

Thinking that Mary was going to the tomb, many of the guests, including Jesus' enemies, followed her. However, she did not go to the tomb, but ran out to where Martha had said Jesus would be waiting for her. When she reached Him she fell at His feet. "Lord if you had been here, my brother would not have died". She looked up at Him, uncontrollable tears coursing down her dusty cheeks. So many times it seemed, she had looked up at Him from the dirt. The others arrived, and now quite a crowd surrounded the scene watching to see what He would say. Enemies asked themselves, "Doesn't he know who this woman is?" Friends looked at Mary's distress with sympathetic hearts, and wept with her.

As Jesus looked at the distraught woman at His feet, and as He looked at the weeping mourners, an overwhelming sense of pity for lost humankind swept over Him. What hopelessness was their lot. What a pitiful legacy Satan's diabolical rulership had left mankind. The King of the universe surrounded by misery; what a sight for heaven to behold. Jesus discerned the different sentiments in the crowd at that moment. He knew that some would soon be plotting His life, and that some were not true friends of Lazarus at all. With prophetic eye, He looked ahead to the time, only one generation away, when Jerusalem would be totally destroyed by Roman legions, and many of the hardhearted and stiff-necked people standing before Him today would perish. For the sensitive Son of God, this scene was too much. He wept.

Jesus started toward the tomb, mourners leading the way. When they arrived, it was expected that He would join them in mourning, but He did not. Instead he stood before the closed up cave, and said, *Take away the stone.* Immediately consternation broke out. Mary understood, but ever practical Martha strongly objected, for Lazarus had been dead four days.

In Jewish tradition, a comatose body could return to life for up to three days. For this reason, enemies of Jesus had claimed that the daughter of Jairus, whom He had raised the day she died, and the son of the widow of Nain, whom He had raised on the way to burial, were not dead at all, but only asleep.

But not four days! After four days, sufficient decomposition had taken place that there was no doubt. After four days a corpse stank. Even Martha did not want her brother coming out of the tomb now.

Jesus rebuked her. *Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?* Believe, Martha; believe as Mary does. Did I not just tell you that I am the resurrection and the life; that he who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die? Do you believe this?

Jesus raised his hands to heaven and looking up said, *Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I know you always hear me, but I say this for the benefit of those who are standing here, that they may believe that you sent me.* Jesus was aware that in the crowd were those who had only recently accused Him of blasphemy when He had said, *I and my Father are one.*[24] Yet even now He still sought their salvation.

With the stone moved aside, all could plainly see the corpse wrapped in traditional linen strips lying motionless on the floor of the cave. What *was* this Teacher about to do?

With a radiance illuminating His face, Jesus cried out in a loud command, *Lazarus, come out!* At the end of time when those who sleep in the dust will be raised to life, it will be the same voice that will cry out,

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[24] John 10:30

You who dwell in the dust, wake up and shout for joy.[25] When the One who is the source of life cries out, death cannot hold its victim. A movement was discerned in the cave; people gasped in horror and fright, for the corpse had moved. Slowly it sat up. Awkwardly, it rose to its feet and turned toward the light. People ran for their lives in terror. *Take off the grave clothes,* Jesus instructed. Some courageous people ran to him and unwound the linen wraps. Lazarus stood free and tall. No trace of corruption remained; a fragrance of heaven had replaced it. No sign of disease marred his flesh, for he stood in the full vigour of manhood.

Mary and Martha ran to their brother in joy, and escorted him along with a rejoicing crowd to the house. But Jesus quietly slipped away to be alone with His heavenly Father.

The raising of Lazarus from death had the most profound effect on Judea. More people than ever before came to believe on Jesus as the Messiah. But there were storm clouds on the horizon. The Pharisees were not happy. They saw their power over the people being rapidly eroded as people turned in hope toward the One who seemed to love them with His whole being. Plans were laid down. This Teacher must be put to death, they said, before He turned Israel upside down and the Romans stepped in and in frustration destroyed the whole nation.[26]

Meanwhile Jesus continued to preach in Judea. Wherever He went crowds followed. Mary was always there. These days she never left the group of His closest followers, and whenever He taught the people she was there sitting at His feet, drinking in His every word.

Was it because of her wretched earlier condition, or was it because she was a good student? But Mary, as she sat at the feet of Jesus, developed an understanding of Him that few others could comprehend. That fateful day at the Temple she had heard Him say, *I am going away, and you will look for me…*, *When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am.*[27] Mary had often pondered those words. The popular belief was that Jesus would form an army to overthrow the Romans and then set Himself up as King on David's throne. But the Master made no reference to this. In fact, He was saying more and more strange things about His impending death. Often He used parables, and sometime couched His words in language hard to be understood. For instance, one day he said, "*The stone which the builders rejected has become the main cornerstone".* [28]

It was evident that even His disciples did not pick up on these words, but Mary sensed in them a foreboding, something sinister. She understood the Stone to refer to Himself. She had grown to love Jesus, but this love confused her. It wasn't that she measured Him against other men, for she realised fully He was the Son of God. But how do you love the Son of God?

Jesus was not unaware of Mary's confusion. There was no condemnation for her in it. Rather, it was His desire that all come to love Him as Mary did. It was to His deepest disappointment that so few really understood His life and mission. But Mary, in her devotion to Him, was able to understand things that no one else could grasp. Thus, as He had opportunity, Jesus opened to her mind the words of Isaiah[29] and other scriptures[30] which foretold how He, the Creator of man, must also become the Redeemer of man. He explained to her how only by the shedding of blood can sin, her sin, be atoned for. The lamb slain at the Passover, Mary learned, was just a symbol; a promise. But Jesus was the One to whom it pointed. He was the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world[31]; the Great Antitype to which all prophecy pointed.

So Mary, in her humility, learned truths only to be understood later by others, even by the disciples. She began to understand just how much her sin and its forgiveness really cost Jesus. What Love is this that forgives even the dregs of society? But what price to pay? In forgiving Mary, Jesus was giving His all, even His life, to pay the price that the Law of God demands for the forgiveness of sin.[32] Mary knew that in return she must give her all to Him. But what does a redeemed harlot have to give a King?

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25 Isaiah 26:19

26 John 11:50

27 John 8:21,28

28 Luke 20: 9-19

29 Isaiah 53.

30 For example, Genesis 3:15; Psalm 22.

31 Hebrews 10:10-14; I Corinthians 5:7.

32 Hebrews 9:22; Romans 6:23.

Mary's devotion to the Teacher led to some tensions between the sisters following the raising of their brother. Maybe Martha felt embarrassed at Christ's gentle rebuke at the tomb. Maybe it was the strain of adjustment that was required having Mary home again as well as a celebrity brother in the house. Martha was a woman of principle who knew what was right and would never flinch from duty. She lived an organised and well regulated life that earned her the respect of Bethany society. With her brother's connections and new-found fame, she was also known and respected in Jerusalem.

Mary, on the other hand, was highly strung, spontaneous and emotional. Discipleship had become profoundly healing for her, but scars always remain. Christian maturity does not appear overnight, but comes only as positive habits are formed and lessons learned. Mary was still young in her new walk, and was still unpredictable. She had earned none of the status of her pragmatic elder sister.

Tensions came to a head quite unexpectedly. Jesus, knowing that the religious leaders were now plotting His death, had decided to leave the densely populated environs of Jerusalem, which included Bethany, and depart for Ephraim, some 12 miles north, where he could spend a few final days alone with the disciples. They passed through Bethany en route to bid farewell to their friends, and remained to enjoy the family's hospitality before recommencing the journey.

After welcoming her guests, Martha busied herself preparing a meal, but Mary, the unstated sense of foreboding growing stronger within her, preferred to sit once again at the feet of the Teacher whom she totally loved and trusted.

Martha, becoming aware that Mary was leaving all the work to her, found herself concentrating more on the work to be done than on the presence of her guests. She began to worry that her they would have to leave before the meal was ready, for they would want to reach Ephraim before sundown. A sense of frustration came over her, and quite unreasonably, she found herself blaming Mary for her predicament. Try as she might to swallow her unreasonable thoughts, it became too much for her when she found a needed item missing. In her frustration she went out to Jesus and complained to Him that it was not fair for Mary to leave all the work to her.

Mary looked on, embarrassed, and made as if to go out to help. But the teacher reached out and took Martha's hand, and bid her sit down. Gently He reminded her that it was spiritual food that was important, not the food that today is, and tomorrow is gone. "Sit at my feet and learn of me Martha, for I will not be with you much longer. There is one thing you need, Martha, something that Mary has found; that is a hunger for knowledge of the things of God. You have always limited yourself to what you know how to do, but I tell you, there is no limit to what you will achieve if you first sit at my feet and learn from me. Mary has discovered that, and nothing she has will ever be taken away from her."

An event that took place some days later, just six days before the Passover, gave Mary an opportunity to demonstrate her love for the Master. It was the Sabbath day and the Master was again in Bethany, and staying, as usual, at Mary's home. It was, ironically, Simon who provided the opportunity. He was planning a banquet that evening after the Sabbath. To it he had invited all the town's dignitaries. Special guests would be the Teacher and his disciples. And Lazarus of course. To invite the man raised from the dead and the One who raised him would make this the most talked about social event for months. And don't forget Martha; her organisational and catering skills would certainly help ensure the success of the occasion.

Whilst Simon did not understand the Teacher, nor did he profess any desire to be His follower, he nevertheless felt drawn toward Him, and felt a desire to know Him better. After all, he would still be a leprous outcast if it was not for the healing power of the Teacher. This would be a way of expressing his gratitude without having to become a follower. It would also help re-establish his status in the town.

The previous day word had been sent throughout Bethany and all the guests graciously accepted the invitation; no one would turn down this one. That morning Martha had gone off to the market with Simon's wife to prepare for the occasion so that the Sabbath could be left free in accordance with the Law.

A respectable wait after sunset and the closing of Sabbath, and guests began to arrive at Simon's house. The Teacher, as guest of honour, was invited to take His place on a couch at the head of the table. Others jockeyed for position according to their own estimation of their importance.

Nobody saw Mary quietly enter through the servants' entrance. Her face covered by a shawl, she was carrying the basket she had brought so carefully from Magdala just a few weeks before. Of course one could not blame Simon for not having invited Mary to the banquet. She was, after all, technically banned from Bethany, but who would enforce that now that she was one of the Teacher's most ardent followers? It was however, unthinkable for Mary to actually attend the banquet; Simon's wife would tear her eyes out if she had half the chance.

But Mary was not thinking of this. She was aware only of her love and gratitude for the One who had redeemed her from her degradation; who had restored her dignity and sense of self-worth. And now she knew He must die. She did not know when, but a sense of foreboding told her that soon her Master would be taken away, and she did not know where they would take Him. Emotion welled up inside her like a tsunami that nothing could check.

Mary had only one thing of material value in her life. Only one thing of beauty and purity fit for the Master. It was that touch of the beautiful in the world of her past ugliness; that touch of quality amid the ocean of her degradation. Fighting back the flood of emotion within her, Mary made her way across the room to where her Master was reclining, his feet, following custom, facing back away from the table. Tears blurred her vision as she tried to gain her objective without being obstructed.

Finally she reached Jesus and knelt at His feet. Then she placed the basket by her side and removed from it the alabaster jar with its precious contents. She removed the lid and began to pour the fragrant perfume over her Master's head and feet. As she did so her own emotions, already at bursting point, overflowed in an agony of soul that was gratitude for her forgiveness overwhelmed by grief for His impending death. She continued to pour the oil and massage it into His feet until not a drop remained in the jar. Then she removed the comb from her hair, and letting her hair fall onto his feet, used it to dry the excess oil from His skin.

As the exquisite fragrance drew attention to itself, an awkward silence filled the room. Gradually, murmurs and comments about expense and wastage could be heard. Mary, in embarrassment and confusion crouched sobbing at Jesus' feet, and would have fled from the room had not Jesus Himself reached out in a gesture of acceptance that bade her remain.

Simon was thinking hard. This he had not planned for. Mary was in his house. A harlot in the house of a Pharisee. This was not to be tolerated. Did the Teacher not realise who this woman was? His reputation would be permanently damaged if it was known that a whore had washed his feet. Besides if He really was the Prophet He claimed to be, he would never have permitted this incident to take place…

Immediately Simon thought those words, Jesus looked sharply across at him, and again Simon found himself withering before the gaze of One who repeatedly had shown Himself to be the superior of the two. Jesus broke the silence.[33]

Simon, I have something I want to say to you.

Simon was unable to speak, but managed to gasp, "Say it Rabbi".

Two men owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred day's wages, and the other fifty. Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he cancelled the debts of both. Now which of them do you suppose will love him more?

"I suppose the one who had the bigger debt cancelled".

You have judged correctly.

Then Jesus turned his attention to Mary, and whilst looking tenderly at her, said to Simon. *Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. Therefore I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven, for she has loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little. When she poured this perfume on my body, she did it to prepare me for burial. And I tell you the truth. Wherever the Good News is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told in memory of her.*

That evening after the guests had left, two men went out into the night alone in different parts of Bethany. One, the Teacher, went out to pray for the soul of a man who was about to undergo an intense struggle.

The other, Simon, went out because he was deeply troubled, and needed to be alone with the God he had tried all his life to serve. This Teacher knew even the secrets of his heart. *He who has been forgiven little loves little.* What was Jesus saying? Was He saying that he, Simon, was not forgiven? But why? How

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33 Luke 7:36-50; Matt 26:6-13

could he, a Pharisee, be unforgiven when Mary the sinner was forgiven? Was she not far worse that he was? But don't forget: if Jesus knew even his secret thoughts, then He also knew about his relationship with Mary. Of *course* He did. What was it He wrote in the sand that day at the Temple? *He who causes one of my children who loves me to sin; it would be better for him that he be thrown into the sea with a millstone around his neck.*[34] How could he ever forget that day? The day the leprosy came.

Understanding began to grow in Simon's Pharisaical mind. He was the one who had led Mary into her life of degradation. Yet she had repented and was forgiven. Mary the sinner *was* forgiven whilst he, Simon the Pharisee was not.

What was it the Teacher had said tonight? *Two men owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred day's wages, and the other fifty.* The answer was simple; Mary owed the five hundred, he owed the fifty. Mary the sinner, and he the Pharisee who had shown insufficient hospitality. The whole room had understood that. Right?

Or was it right? Is that what Jesus was really saying? Then why the millstone around the neck? Why the sense of guilt that was beginning to weigh him down so that he could hardly stand? Why did he feel so unclean in the presence of the Teacher?

Then the truth hit Simon like the blow from a hammer. It was he, Simon, who owed the five hundred days' wages. Mary was simply the little child who had been led into sin. Her debt was minute compared with his, yet she had washed Jesus' feet in her tears, while he, Simon, had sat there in his smug self-righteousness.

He who has been forgiven little loves little. Now it all made sense. Mary sinned because of *his* sin. Therefore his sin was the greater. Now comprehension flooded Simon's mind and soul. For the first time he began to see himself as Jesus saw him. A sense of his own evil came over him and he fell on his face before God and wept.[35]

In another garden in Bethany the Teacher arose from His knees. Joy filled His heart. A great victory had been won.

26

The following day[36] the Teacher left Bethany for Jerusalem. A great crowd followed. Among them was Mary, ever as close to her beloved Master as she could be. Also among them was Simon.

When they reached the Mount of Olives the procession stopped as two of Jesus' disciples came to meet them from Jerusalem. They were leading a donkey. When the two men reached the Master they removed their cloaks and placed them on the donkey's back. Then the Master took His place on them, and riding the donkey, He led the way into Jerusalem. The symbolism was understood by all, for it is written:

Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion!
Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem.
See your King comes to you,
Righteous and having salvation,
Gentle, and riding on a donkey,
On a colt, the foal of a donkey.[37]

The crowd danced around Him waving palm branches in the air and strewing them on the ground before their King. Voices were raised in praise and song as the people cried out,

Hosanna to the Son of David.

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34 Matthew 18:5

35 The Scriptures do not record Simon's conversion. It is, rather, a gesture on the part of this writer who believes in the power of God to soften all hearts such as that of Simon. Even the Pharisee is not beyond salvation.

36 *John 12:12.* The exact sequence of events is not clear from the Gospels. Mark says the anointing took place two days before the Passover. John says Jesus entered Bethany six days before the Passover, and that the Triumphal Entry took place the day after the anointing. In that case Jesus would have returned to Bethany on the Friday before.

37 Zechariah 9:9

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.
Hosanna in the highest.[38]

7

Mary's world crashed around her again on the sixth day of that week. Jesus died! They killed him! His popularity was too much for the religious leaders. The fear and contempt she had held for these men had gradually begun to wash away since she had found her new life in Christ, and was being replaced by a sort of pity. But *this*…was there no end to their evil? His execution she had not had the courage to watch except from a distance, but now, with the end of the strange darkness, she had come back to Jesus. In numb shock she huddled at the foot of the wooden cross on which hung the body of her beloved Master. Her hands gripped the purpled, swollen and disfigured feet, while her forehead rested on his ankles, her tears forming rivulets in the blood-stained dust. Blood dripped on her as He hung naked above, slumped forward unnaturally, His weight trying to force open the vicious wounds from nails driven cruelly through hands that had been used to do so much good; through feet that had walked so far in the service of mankind.

There were two other crosses on Calvary that day, and Mary watched in horror as a soldier went to one of them, placed his spear behind the knees of the criminal, between the knees and the cross, and levered the spear horizontally until the man's pelvic joints were dislocated. The criminal screamed out in pain as, no longer able to support himself by his feet, his body suddenly dropped until his hands took his entire weight. Suspended in this manner, and his heart unable to withstand the shock of such an injury, the man's breathing quickly became laboured and irregular. Satisfied that the man would soon be dead, the executioner sauntered across to the other criminal and repeated the procedure with similar results. Mary nearly fainted with terror and grief when the soldier turned his attention to Jesus. She cried out in protest against this barbaric act, but the soldier, noticing that Jesus was already dead, roughly pushed her aside, and plunged his spear into the heart of the man identified by a sign above His head as the King of the Jews.

This event shocked Mary to the core; could this nightmare really be happening? She neither knew nor cared that blood from the new wound was running down onto her clothing. She just clung to the feet of her Master, losing all track of time.

A gentle touch on Mary's shoulder caused her to look up. An elderly man was standing there whom she did not know. With him was a hated Pharisee, from whom she instinctively recoiled. The man knelt and spoke gently to her explaining that he and the Pharisee were both followers of Jesus, and that they had come to take down the body of the Lord from the cross. They needed to do this quickly, he said, because He should be properly buried before the soon approaching Sabbath hours.

Mary rose to her feet, relieved that somebody seemed to be taking control, and the elderly man signalled to two servants standing a respectful distance away, and who were carrying various items they would need in order to accomplish their task.

As the men started preparing the tools, the soldier who had speared Jesus came over demanded to know what they were doing. The Pharisee gave him a signed order, and he appeared satisfied. Other people came; some were Jesus' followers, some were curious bystanders, others felt sympathy for this man who had died this afternoon.

Removing a man's body from a cross to which it is nailed is not a simple procedure, and Mary turned away as they went to work. The cross had been dropped into a hole deep enough to support it vertically, but to lift it out took some strength. Quickly driving in two spikes, one either side of the cross, the two servants were able to lift it vertically, and with the help of many willing hands, lower it gently to the ground. People crowded around. Mary immediately went to the Saviour's head and removed the cruel tiara that had been forced deep into His scalp, and then she, along with some other women, using their own attire, began to wipe the blood from his wounded body. The Pharisee took a cloth and covered Jesus' nakedness.

Next came the difficult task of removing the nails. They were driven deep into the wood, and could only be removed with some effort with Christ's hands and feet still fastened to them. The only alternative would be a gruesome attempt to pull the hands and feet off the nails, but this would have caused further damage, and shown lack of respect for the deceased. The servant produced a hollow wooden tube which he placed over the head of a nail, allowing him to work the nail backwards and forwards until it was loose enough to remove by hand. With a man and tube on each nail, the job took just a few minutes. When the

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[38] Matthew 21:9

nails were out, the men placed the body of Jesus gently onto a linen sheet to allow the women to wash it with water and with oil.

Meanwhile, with shadows lengthening into evening, the Pharisee laid out a large linen shroud alongside the body and lined it liberally with a mixture of myrrh and aloes that he had brought. When the women had finished their work, the men gently took Jesus' body from the first linen cloth and reverently placed it upon the shroud. More spices and herbs were added until the entire body was covered in them. Finally the shroud was wrapped around the body and long strips of linen wrapped around it from neck to toe, and a special cloth wrapped around the head.

With the now sweetly fragrant body prepared for burial, several men gently lifted it onto their shoulders, and bore it in the direction indicated by the elderly man who had first spoken to Mary. Quite a procession formed as the man and the Pharisee led the way, followed by the pallbearers, then by the women, and then other interested onlookers. The man led them into a garden, not far from Calvary, where there was an empty tomb that he had prepared for his own soon demise, a large circular stone rested next to the entrance. Inside the tomb was a stone shelf carved out of rock long enough to place a corpse. Gently, they lay the body of the Lord onto the shelf, arranged it tidily, the women came over and placed more herbs and spices around it, and everyone stood back wanting to do something more, but not knowing what. The Pharisee raised his hand to gain attention, and when all eyes were upon him, in accordance with Jewish burial custom, he began to sing a *Kaddish*:

> *I will show my greatness and holiness, and I will make myself known in the sight of many nations. Then they will know that I am the LORD*[39]*.*

The mourners responded, *May His great Name be blessed forever and ever.* Then they vacated the tomb, allowing a group of the men to roll the stone over the entrance.

Behind them, the sun dipped behind the hills. The Sabbath had begun; the Redeemer of the world was at rest.

Even before it was light enough to see on the morning of the first day of the week, Mary, who had stayed in Jerusalem with some other women over the Sabbath, set out for the tomb taking with her more spices. Knowing that others would not be far behind her, she half ran, half stumbled in the darkness. She didn't even know why she was going; how could she place more spices around the body when it was sealed behind a big stone? In fact she didn't understand anything of the events of the past two days. In her grief nothing made sense. Why had He died? True He had made cryptic remarks about suffering, and had even made that strange remark when she poured her perfume over his feet. He had said she was doing it for His burial. As she had sat at His feet in recent months, she had begun to understand the plan of salvation, that without the shedding of blood, no sin could be forgiven. But today nothing made sense; how could they destroy the best man who had ever lived?

In this state of confusion she arrived at the tomb. There was nobody there; she was the first to arrive. There was still little light, and it was not until she was quite close that she sensed something wrong. Then she saw what it was; the stone was in the wrong place; it had been rolled back. Somebody had taken the body of Jesus. In desperation and grief she burst into tears and, dropping the spices, ran as fast as she could back to where the disciple John was staying. Arriving completely breathless and hysterical, she cried out, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him".

Since Jesus' arrest the disciples had scattered in fear of their lives and were nowhere to be found. The one exception was John, who had remained faithful throughout the ordeal, and was the only disciple to witness the crucifixion. This had turned out to be a great blessing for him because, even though dying, Jesus had had the compassion to ask John to care for Mary His mother.

Not only did John take Jesus' mother into his home, but he also took the trouble to seek out Peter, whom he knew would be feeling wretched since his profane denial of any knowledge of Christ. Upon finding him, he had persuaded him to return with him. Thus the two were together when the hysterical Mary Magdalene arrived with the news that Jesus' body had been stolen.

Without hesitation, the two men ran off to the tomb leaving Mary standing there. She turned again and ran after them. When she arrived, they had been there a few minutes, but in her distraught state, was not able to comprehend what they said to her. They seemed confused too, and said something about the burial clothes being folded up, and that they were going home.

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[39] The Mourners' Kaddish, based on Ezekiel 38:23 is used today at burials, but it is not known to have been used in Jesus' day. How fitting the words are in light of the events to follow.

Mary stood outside the tomb alone, not knowing what to do. Not only had they killed her Lord, but they had taken him away, and she couldn't even mourn for him. Why had they taken Him? Was it the Pharisee's doing? Was it grave robbers? Was it the rich man who had changed his mind about using his tomb? In desperation, she peered into the tomb through her tears as though doing so might reveal an answer. To her immense surprise she saw two men in pure white inside seated one at each end of the empty shelf. One of them addressed her and asked, "Woman, why are you weeping?" Not understanding who they were, and assuming they knew where Jesus was, she cried out, "They have taken away my Lord, and I don't know where they have laid him".

At that moment Mary became aware of a presence behind her. She turned and saw someone there, but in the early morning and through her tears she thought it was the man who looked after the garden. He would know where the body was. *"Woman",* the man said, *"Why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?"*

"Sir, if you have put Him somewhere, tell me where, and I will find another tomb for Him". If Jesus was not considered worthy of this rich man's tomb, she knew of one in Bethany that He could have. It had belonged to her brother Lazarus, but now it was empty.

"Mary".

That voice! Only one man ever spoke to her like that; that was the voice that she heard all those times she had been overcome by her demons, and cried out for help. That was the voice that calmed her nerves and soothed her fears. That was the voice that said, "*neither do I condemn you"*. That was the voice of Jesus.

Crying out in joy, she fell at his feet and took them in her hands. But Jesus stopped her. *"Don't detain me Mary, for I have not yet returned to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God".*

Mary could not yet understand that for the risen Christ there was one thing of paramount importance – to know that His sacrifice was accepted by the Father. It had not been His injuries that killed Him, serious though they were; it had been the experience of sensing the withdrawal of God's presence that had been too much for Christ to bear. The death Christ died on Calvary was not the sleep that comes upon man at the end of his life; it was the death that sinful man experiences when he is finally banished from the presence of God, the Second Death. He had died of a broken heart, for the Father had forsaken Him.

"Touch me not…For I must present the First-fruits offering to God. I must know that my sacrifice is sufficient, that I am not forsaken." Christ the Passover Lamb was sacrificed, but on the third day was the Festival of the First-fruits, the festival in which the priest would take the first ripening grains in the field and present them to God on behalf of the people. Now Christ the First-fruits must ascend to the Father. He could not allow anything to hinder Him until He knew that His sacrifice was accepted by heaven. Now the risen Christ must come into the presence of God the Father; must hold open His nail-pierced hands before the Throne and ask, "*Father, Is it enough?"*

Mary was bidden by Christ to go and tell the others that He had risen from the dead. In accepting His instruction, she became the first in all the world to be commissioned by Christ to spread the good news of a risen Saviour; the First Apostle. "I have seen the Lord!"

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